

Proselytizing or Evangelizing? Applying the Doctrine of Church and Ministry When Dealing with the Heterodox Christian

[Pastoral Theology Paper; 1988]

by R. Dennis Rardin

As the history of our world groans on to its end, applying the balm of Scriptural truth to the ravages of sin becomes more and more difficult. God's simple command "Do not murder" does not seem so simple in the intensive care ward of a modern hospital. "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man" raises soul-searching questions in an age when many men abdicate their leadership roles, so that the spiritual welfare of the family and the work of the church often suffer.

So also Christ's command to teach all nations raises difficult questions. For Satan's blood-thirsty wolves are stalking believers as never before. In much of Christendom, doctrines that lie at the very heart of Christianity—the identity of the true God as triune, the physical resurrection and deity of Christ and the vicarious atonement—are questioned or even dismissed outright. Some even question the existence of a God who intervenes in human affairs. Fundamental precepts of the moral law are laid aside. Law and Gospel are more than confounded. They are often robbed of any Biblical meaning whatsoever. Antichrist has grown so bold as to deny the Athanasian creed by embracing universalism. He does little to restrain those who would deny his flock the crumbs of spiritual food his councils and decrees have left. Christendom is splintered, and one by one the wolves would savage the pieces.

This widespread desertion of God's truth adds a new complexity to the Great Commission. Who should be considered a legitimate prospect for evangelism? When, if ever, is it proper to "proselytize," in other words to present to practicing members of visible Christian churches the whole counsel of God to lead them to mark and avoid their churches' errors? On what criteria should such eternally important decisions be made?

That not all proselytizing is proper is clear from the Scriptures' doctrine of the Church. The Lutheran church has long recognized that the invisible church cannot be identified with any one visible Christian church; the Word is effective even when its teachers obscure it with false doctrine, and hypocrites remain in the most orthodox of congregations.

Matt. 23:2-3, 7-10--The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach . . . they love to be greeted in the marketplace and to have men call them "Rabbi." But you are not to be called "Rabbi," for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth "father," for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called "teacher," for you have one Teacher, the Christ. (Members of the corrupt Jewish church were members of the one invisible church if they believed the Scriptures preached there.)

Is. 55:11--My Word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and prosper wherever I send it.

Gal. 1:2b-3--To the churches in Galatia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ("Churches" in spite of faith-destroying errors which were being tolerated)

They also teach that *one holy Church* is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered. (Augsburg Confession, VII, Triglot p. 97)

But the Church is not only the fellowship of outward objects and rites, as other governments, but it is originally a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in hearts; which fellowship nevertheless has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. (Apology, VII VIII, Triglot p. 227)

Because there are believers in heterodox Christian churches, those called to public ministry within them, errorists though they may be, have a divine call to the public ministry.

Matt. 18:18, 20--Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven . . . For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

Eph. 4:11--It was he who gave some to be . . . pastors and teachers.

Wherever there is a true church, the right to elect and ordain ministers necessarily exists. (Smalcald Articles, "Of the Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops," Triglot p.523)

These truths should comfort us when we see apostasy in the church. In spite of the false teachers, even the elect in the kingdom of Antichrist cling to Christ alone with a Spirit-worked obstinacy. Finally, that anyone is given faith is an astounding miracle. Any ministry conducted by sinners is effective only because of the awesome power of the Means of Grace. For a Lutheran evangelist to believe himself less unworthy of the ministry, or to consider the fruits of his ministry not quite so astounding a miracle, is blasphemy. "For we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God, and not from us." (2 Cor. 4:7)

So no evangelist dare deal with members of heterodox churches as he does with unbelievers, or he denies the doctrine of the Church. If his words or actions imply that the heterodox pastor does not have a divine call, he violates the divinely established relationship between the heterodox believer and the shepherd given him by the Holy Spirit.

Nor (as the student paper in the bibliography would have it) does this relationship depend on the heterodox member's personal participation in the calling process. The process by which the call is extended is a matter of adiaphoron. Even so impersonal a process as the casting of lots among qualified candidates would be legitimate (Acts 1:26).

It is not the member's participation in his pastor's calling which establishes the pastoral relationship, but his consent in his church's method for calling its workers, often given tacitly by membership. For this reason our Assignment Committee gives Seminary graduates a divine call, even though the members of the congregation issued the call quite indirectly. For this reason a

single woman, with no direct voting rights in the congregation, has a pastoral relationship with the man the congregation has called.

The Reformers therefore recognized as divine the calls extended through Rome's hierarchy—even those extended through the ministry of unbelieving bishops. They objected to this practice only when bishops demanded this right and congregations were loathe to give it, or when the bishops appointed patently unqualified ministers. Divine calls are valid because believers extend them directly by vote, or indirectly by delegating their authority to call and accepting the ministry of the one who receives the call.

Phil. 2:18--The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.

Luke 10:16--He who listens to you (including Judas) listens to me.

Concerning this subject [ecclesiastical order] we have frequently testified in this assembly that it is our greatest wish to maintain church-polity and the grades in the Church, even though they have been made by human authority. (Apology XIV, Triglot p. 315)

Both the Sacraments and Word (and also the call extended on the basis of that Word] are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men. They condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect. (Augsburg Confession, VIII, Triglot p. 47. Also cf. Apology VII & VIII, 27, Triglot pp. 235-237)

Individual persons and boards can indeed extend a divine call, but only when they are commissioned to do so by those whose the power originally (*principaliter et immediate*) is, or when these have, at least, given their silent consent. (Pieper, III, 452)

It is with this perspective on the divine call that Luther could write his diatribe *Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers*. In this work, Luther most strongly defended the rights and prerogatives of public ministers against the Anabaptists, who without a call would assume the role of public minister wherever they believed false doctrine was being taught.

In sum, St. Paul would not tolerate the wickedness and arrogance of someone interfering with the office of another . . . If the incumbents of the office teach wrongly, what affair is that of yours? You are not called to give account for it. (Luther's Works, Vol. 40, p. 391)

Luther's statement bristles because it seems to consign people to the tender mercies of perverse heretics. Yet there was then, and is for us now, a legitimate way to bring the pure Gospel to those poor souls. The answer is not to look for a loophole which makes the call of an orthodox minister superior to that of a heterodox minister. We find it, rather, when we quit making public ministers more or less than what they are—servants, equippers and teachers of universal priests.

It is important for us to remember that the private functions of the universal priesthood do not conflict with a divine call. Luther's concern was that the Anabaptists were denying universal priests the exclusive right to extend a divine call. "You are not called to give account" (cf. Heb. 13:17). The whole work is written in the context of Luther's high, Scriptural regard for the priesthood of all believers. He constantly exhorted Christians to exercise this office, because he realized that in it alone resides the power of the keys. The call to public ministry is limited in scope, because it is a partial and very specific delegation of the priests' authority.

Eph. 4:11-13--It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ might be built up, until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Behold, thus must the office of preaching, or the ministry, be distinguished from the universal priesthood of all baptized Christians. For this office is nothing more than a public service, which is delegated to one by the whole congregation, though all of them are priests together. (Luther, quoted by Pieper, III, p. 992.)

Though we are not all in the public office and calling, still every Christian should and may teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, reprove his neighbor with God's Word whenever and wherever he finds someone in need of it . . . For a Christian certainly can teach the other one who is still ignorant or weak and admonish him with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, (Lord's) Prayer, etc., and he who hears it is in duty bound to receive it from him as God's Word and join in confessing it publicly. (Luther on Ps. 110:9, quoted in Pieper, III, p. 991.)

So the office of the public ministry is limited in two ways. The office's scope may be limited by the congregation. When it calls a parochial or Sunday school teacher, elder, or what have you, it gives calls that are rather specific in scope compared to that of the pastor. These ministers' calls are just as public and legitimate as the pastor's, but grant authority in narrower spheres of activity.

Scripture itself also sets limits on the scope of the public ministry. No public ministry relieves the laity of their responsibility to search and interpret the Scriptures, of their duty to "be prepared to give a reason for the hope (they) have," to "teach and admonish one another with all wisdom," and so forth. The public ministry is not established at the expense of the universal priesthood. Rather, the public ministry enhances the function of the priesthood. A pastor, for example, does so by bringing order and his aptitude to teach to the public use of the keys, and by using the prerogatives of his office to strengthen and instruct the priests in their own private works of service.

The public minister, then, is divinely called to serve his own sheep (as well as sharing the universal call to seek the lost.) If he seeks to usurp the prerogatives of his counterpart in another Christian church he defeats both purposes he was called to fulfill. He is causing disorder and confusion instead of bringing order. And instead of teaching universal priests to understand and use the power of their priesthood, he subverts the authority of universal priests by denying them the right to call their own ministers.

This is the meaning of “public” ministry. It is public because it is carried out by order of and on behalf of a congregation of priests. So a pastor who shares the message of righteousness apart from law with a shut-in is conducting public ministry, though no third party may be present. For he acts on behalf of the congregation which called him.

On the other hand, a layperson who shares this same message with a group of several friends in the course of conversation is exercising his priesthood, and is not functioning as a public minister; he needs no special call to confess his faith when the opportunity presents itself. He is not acting on behalf of his church, but is “declaring the praises of him who has called him out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Eph. 4:11-13 clearly says that the building up of Christ’s body is to be done primarily by those equipped for service through the public ministry—by those without a divine call as such. The goal of these works of service is that “we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.” The delegation of the right to publicly use the keys derives from the need to do things “decently and in order,” and the priests’ need for the instruction God would give them through one who is apt to teach.

Therefore the universal priest’s private use of the keys and the Word among fellow-believers does not result in disorder, and the divine call to the public ministry is not violated. Rather, the public ministry’s purpose is being fulfilled. A divine call does not give any public minister exclusive rights to exhort, correct, and reprove, but the sole right to administer the Means of Grace publicly for the universal priests who call him.

The implications of all this bear quite directly on the question of proselytizing. If the word is to denote something we need to avoid, then its meaning must be restricted to usurping the prerogatives of a public minister. So an evangelist, for example, as a public minister of his congregation, ought not teach or instruct members of a heterodox church without their asking; his call does not include them. But as a universal priest, he is to encourage his fellow Christians of all denominations, and admonish and correct whenever he finds opportunity in his station in life. When a priest rebukes error on the basis of the Word, he is not usurping the authority of the public minister. He is rather fulfilling his role as a one who “cannot help but speak the things he has heard and seen” through the work of the public minister.

It is ironic that in our congregations all members have the duty to reprove a pastor’s erroneous teaching, even in public if it comes to that. This is not seen as usurping the pastor’s divine call, but as exercising the right of the universal priest to appeal to the Word which binds his minister.

Yet if he “reproves his neighbor whenever and wherever he sees someone in need of it,” he is seen as usurping the divine call of a public minister. Are the lines between denominations or congregations of greater significance than the bond between fellow-members of the invisible church? If a Lutheran would reprove a Roman Catholic for laziness at their place of employment, would this be a usurpation of a divine call, or a fulfilling of the purpose of the public ministry to “equip God’s people for works of service?” Obviously the latter. If he witnesses to the truth of Scripture in other matters of faith and practice, is this somehow less in order?

This priestly witness, however, must not become a sneaky way to usurp the office of a heterodox minister. And if we are serious about our definition of evangelism, this need not be a problem:

Evangelism with Christians, then, is a reiteration of the Good News that eternal life is a present possession sealed through the promise in Holy Baptism. It is an invitation to reflect consciously on the meaning of that new life in Christ as we work out our eternal life in time. (Donald Abdon, as quoted in *The Theory and Practice of Evangelism*, p. 17.)

If this is the way our members work with their heterodox friends, relatives, neighbors, etc., there will be no danger of interfering with a public minister's call. If study of the Word and mutual encouragement between a WELS Lutheran and a member of another denomination lead the heterodox Christian to seek a shepherd who faithfully teaches the whole counsel of God, this can rightly be attributed to the power of the Holy Spirit as he uses his priests to proclaim the Word. To call it proselytizing is to limit the role and scope of the universal priesthood, when in fact the public ministry is the more limited in scope and function.

With these truths in mind, I propose the following practical guidelines for working with members of heterodox Christian churches:

1. It is a usurping of the call to public ministry when any Christian seeks out heterodox Christians in order to win their membership for his own congregation or denomination.
2. It is a usurping of the call to public ministry to treat a member of a heterodox Christian congregation as an unbeliever, unless he is manifestly impenitent or persistently denies justification by faith alone, the vicarious atonement and resurrection of Christ, or the identity of the one true God as triune.
3. The doctrine of Church and Ministry does not muzzle Christian witness, but guides the Christian as he seeks to exercise his universal priesthood without infringing on the priesthood of another. To usurp or question, directly or by implication, the status of a minister called by priests is one such infringement.
4. It is not a usurping of the call to public ministry to reveal error and explain truth to anyone who asks. This might be called a "call pro tem."
5. It is not a usurping of the call, but the sacred calling of a universal priest to rebuke, warn, exhort, and encourage his fellow believers as his station and calling in life gives him opportunity.
6. As a universal priest is faithfully exercising his priesthood among heterodox Christians, he will consistently apply sound fellowship principles. One of God's purposes in establishing them was to provide opportunities for Christian witness.
7. The universal priest's day-to-day contacts with heterodox Christians are not in the name of the congregation, as a formal evangelism call is. These natural contacts therefore provide opportunities for witness to the heterodox that the public ministry of evangelism may not.
8. Evangelism materials from Reformed sources must be examined carefully for a characteristic lack of appreciation for the divine nature of the call to public ministry.
9. Nevertheless, an evangelist does not usurp a call when he shares his joy in the certainty of justification by faith with the heterodox and encourages them to study the Scriptures. If this relationship is cultivated, the Lord may well use it to provide further opportunity for witness (cf. 14).
10. Too many of the universal priests among us know little about the office they hold. There is simply no substitute to be found for a functioning priesthood of all believers. The pastor's first and highest calling is to equip the saints.

Bibliography

- Bente, F., ed. *Concordia Triglotta*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921.
- Cherney, Kenneth R. *Saving Souls or Stealing Sheep?* Unpublished essay in vertical file.
- Lawrenz, Carl. *A Definitive Study of Proselytizing*. Essay in vertical file.
- Luther, Martin. "Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers." *Luther's Works, Volume 90: Church and Ministry II*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958.
- Luther, Martin. "Concerning the Ministry." *Luther's Works, Volume 90: Church and Ministry II*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958.
- Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953.